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ABSTRACT

The sixth-form curriculum and examinations in Northern Ireland and Britain are examined. "A" level modern language examinations represent rigorous intellectual demands, in which the examiner looks for evidence of imagination, creativity, linguistic subtlety, and critical appraisal far beyond the "O" level. For the ablest students who have a gifted teacher, such a program has merit, but for many, it is a difficult task. Figures on outcomes of students enrolled in the sixth-form curriculum in England and Wales are presented. The "A" level examination system, linked with the entry requirements to degree courses, is considered by many teachers to stimulate good teaching that results in the achievement of high standards. A substantial body of educational opinion, however, is in favor of a widening of curriculum in the sixth form. (SW)

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DEVELOPMENTS IN SIXTH-FORM CURRICULUM AND EXAMINATIONS

(Note: The views expressed in the following paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Department of Education for Northern Ireland.)

The ferment of ideas, the torrents of words and the acres of paper all dealing with education, whether on methodology, on educational technology, on classroom organisation or on secondary reorganisation can hardly have escaped your attention in recent years. May I make it plain from the outset that, unlike a Deputy Senior Chief Inspector in Scotland, I do not bring the message: "Revolution is the only way forward"; nor do I bear a banner with a strange or even familiar device; nor do I wish to appear as the harbinger of a new dawn, the bearer of a torch which, in casting out darkness, will light up for you new summits of achievement. It is, perhaps, more fitting that, as a Civil Servant, I should try to put in perspective what has been happening in the field of sixth-form work in general, and of modern languages in particular, and to examine whether these developments can be reconciled with the needs both of our young people as individuals and of the society we live in. It is, I am sure, even more fitting that as an inspector, I should leave you with questions rather than answers, since the best answers are surely those which fit your own temperament, training, outlook and circumstances, which include the children you teach.

The public interest in education was aroused in October 1976, when the Prime Minister made his now famous speech at Ruskin College, Oxford. As a result, the country gathered up its energies for the Great Debate, which was conducted in a number of regional centres, and the substance of the Debate has found expression in the recent Green Paper, which is intended to provide a basis for discussion and, it is to be hoped, to bring into sharp focus those matters which call for attention and also to show the way forward.

Interesting though it is, the Green Paper is not my topic to-day. I have, however, dwelt very briefly on recent events in order to recall that during the Great Debate, one of the questions being most frequently asked was: "What are schools for?" Now, this question was obviously very difficult or very naive, because, as far as I know, nobody has attempted to answer it, either succinctly or at length and, indeed, I offer it to you for discussion both in the staff room and with your senior classes. It leads me, however, to pose a somewhat parallel question: "What are examinations for?" and here, your answers could be of the greatest interest. Are examinations, for instance, simply a means of assessing progress or achievement, are examinations a means of diagnosis which will influence teaching method? A fundamental question is: Are examinations the product of a pre-determined curriculum or do the examinations themselves determine the nature of the curriculum and the pace of the teaching?

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Can we, in fact, call the end product of an examination education? Now, I do not think I have over-stated the problem: we are all aware of the reverence in which examinations and the results are held especially in Northern Ireland, and many of you will know the story of the late headmaster of one of our grammar schools, who was being gently encouraged by an inspector to give a more cultural flavour to his teaching and who replied: "You put culture on the curriculum and we'll teach it". We will recognise that this headmaster was being quite sincere and that he was motivated by what he felt were the best interests of his pupils. There is, indeed, no doubt of the powerful influence which examinations have wielded on our school curricula and you may often have wondered how, on the one hand, we see growth and development as an upward process from childhood to maturity, whereas in planning an educational programme at secondary level, we seem to work backwards from a pre-determined examination objective. You may regard this as an over-simplification, but I simply ask you to think of it.

Can I ask you now to think of the sixth form and what we mean by it? The concept really took shape in England in the latter years of the last century, and there is no hiding the fact that it was unashamedly elitist. By this stage, boys heading for command in the Army and Navy had already left school, and the sixth form was the nursery for aspirants to the university, almost entirely for Oxbridge, which they entered at late 18 or 19. This concept was rather hardened about 1917 with the introduction of Higher School Certificate, but it would be safe to say that in Northern Ireland the concept existed in very few schools indeed, and that up to the early 1960s, the school career of most of our young people ended at about age 17 or at latest 18 with senior certificate. The advent of O and A levels, however, brought the sixth form fully on our educational scene, and after a few hefty battles, schools agreed, some rather reluctantly, that the A level programme should occupy two years. And so it has become established.

However, the spread of educational opportunity has not provided our sixth forms with an undiluted entry of aspirants for university and other forms of higher education, and a scrutiny of the vocational destinations of sixth-form leavers from any of our schools shows a very wide variety which, apart from the university and teacher training establishments, includes the Civil Service, the Banks, nursing and business. As you can imagine, this variety is even wider and more pronounced in Great Britain, where secondary reorganisation is largely accomplished and where we have a new phenomenon, the "new sixth-former", i.e., the young person who comes back to school after O level, whose aims are not primarily academic and who may wish to leave after one year. You will recall that it was precisely with these young people in mind that the CEE, that is the Certificate of Extended Education, was designed.

It is worth our while to reflect a moment on these young people and on how they should influence our thinking and teaching. Are we to dismiss them as of little consequence and imply that they are wasting both their time and ours? I suggest that you consider them as persons looking for a way ahead and for a sense of fulfilment within their capabilities. If you do, if you talk to them about their background, their hopes and ambitions, it will not surprise me if you find yourself thinking of them not as older pupils but as young people on the threshold of adulthood. Now, it would be both idle and unjust not to acknowledge that many of our heads have recognised this development, and the creation of many sixth-form centres is a tribute to their far-sightedness and wish to meet the needs of these young people. After all, it is worth bearing in mind that many of them will very soon have the same right of franchise as yourselves and that they can then offer to the ballot box their opinions on the great issues which confront our country.

But I ask: are we really meeting their needs in educational terms? Let us take curriculum. I do not know in what terms you think of curriculum, but you may be interested in the following definition which was coined in 1975 by a researcher called Stenhouse:

> An attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice.[1]

I shall be happy to think of curriculum as the educational programme offered by a school, whether under subject headings or as curriculum areas, but I am content to agree, if you wish, that this view may well have inadequacies. A growing number of schools are offering a common curriculum for most children in the early stages of schooling, but we know that from the beginning of Form IV differentiation takes place, usually with a well-defined subject orientation. Many of us may know the anguish with which a sizeable number of youngsters entering Form VI look back on choices which they would gladly like to amend but usually to no avail. And in Form VI, we find our pupils concentrating usually on two, three or possibly four A levels. Well, what do we mean by A levels? Are they just another set of examination subjects demanding a greater recall of factual knowledge than O levels? I do not speak outside the realm of modern languages, but here I would claim that they represent very rigorous intellectual demands, in which the examiner looks for evidence of imagination, creativity, linguistic subtlety and critical appraisal far beyond the frontiers of O level and that these demands certainly call for the full exercise of a maturing mind.

For our ablest pupils in the hands of a gifted teacher, such a programme becomes an experience of rare joy, since all, including the teacher, are on a journey of constantly discovering new doors to open and new heights to scale. For many more, however, it is a much more prosaic and laborous task, whose only reward is a grade sufficiently high to warrant admission to a chosen course in higher education. For many of these, indeed, and certainly for the new sixth-former, this type of programme offers little other than frustration and failure, either actual or potential. I have already recognised the efforts made by many of our schools to cater for sixth-formers as emergent adults and, indeed many schools have a long established practice of devising programmes of general interest for time not spent in examination subjects, but are these devices only palliatives? Do they set out to develop skills and interests which will help the pupil to achieve a full and satisfying life? Do they, for instance, offer any positive vocational elements?

You may answer a resounding "yes" to these questions and, if so, so much the better; you will certainly be in line with the thinking and recommendations of the Green Paper. In the final analysis, however, we must ask ourselves whether we are wise to continue at sixth-form level with what appears to be a rather haphazard curriculum or whether it would be a sounder principle to attempt to construct it on a wider and more carefully formulated base. I use the word "wider" deliberately, since those of you who have visited or taught in German schools will know the breadth of curriculum which is pursued right up to the Abitur. Many of you may have been interested in the European Schools. These represent an interesting mixture of the lycée and the Gymnasium, and from the fourth year onwards the departments come under the headings of Classics, Latin/Modern Languages, Latin/Mathematics, Mathematics/Modern Languages and Economics and Social Science. The curriculum for the sixth and seventh years of the Latin/Modern Language Department consists of Mother Tongue, Latin, Philosophy, Modern Languages I, II, III, History, Geography, Mathematics, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, PE, Religion/Ethics and optional (Music, History of Art or Civica). If we take Economics and Social Science, then the programme includes Mother Tongue, Philosophy, Law, Modern Languages I and II, History, Geography, Economic Geography, Sociology, Mathematics, Applied Mathematics, Economics, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, PE, Religion/Ethics, optional (as before).

Another development which must have caught your attention at some stage is the International Baccalaureate. This Diploma is gained after two years' study and was designed specifically for the growing numbers of young people who, as children of diplomats or as representatives of multi-national interests, are constantly on the move. The intention of the course is both to forge links of international understanding and to bridge the gaps between national educational

systems. It is now firmly established in all five continents and while in the United Kingdom its main centre is the United World (or Atlantic) College, South Wales, it has spread to a number of other centres, including the Hammersmith and West London Technical College and Avery Hill Training College, to name but two. This examination aims to embrace both the Arts and Sciences for all pupils up to age eighteen and within its framework it offers flexibility and choice. It does not aim to supersede existing national systems but rather to complement them and you may be interested in the following general outline:

(Only students who are entered by a participating school and who have completed two years' preparation are eligible to sit for the examinations leading to the award of the International Baccalaureate Diploma.) The Examination requires the candidate to offer six subjects. Three subjects, at the candidate's choice, must be offered at higher level, and the other three at subsidiary level. The general scheme for the six subjects is as follows:

1. Language A (First Language) (Including the study of some World Literature)
2. Language B (Second Language) (or another language A)
3. Study of Man (one of the following options): (a) History (b) Geography (c) Economics (d) Philosophy (e) Psychology (f) Social Anthropology
4. Experimental Sciences (one of the following options): (a) Biology (b) Chemistry (c) Physics (d) Physical Science (counts as two subjects) (e) Scientific Studies
5. Mathematics (Candidates offering mathematics at higher level may also offer "further mathematics" as a subsidiary level subject
6. One of the following: (a) Art and Design (b) Music (c) A classical language (d) A second language B (e) A Second study of Man subject (f) A second Science subject (g) Further mathematics (h) A syllabus designed by the school according to its own needs and teaching resources as an alternative to a subject under headings 3, 4 or 6, at subsidiary level only.

In addition to the above six subjects, each candidate must:–

(i) complete a substantial piece of independent work in one of the six subjects of his Diploma and must write an extended essay based upon it;

(ii) follow a common course in the Theory of Knowledge, which will be internally assessed and which may be moderated by the Chief Examiner for Philosophy;

(iii) engage in some form of creative, aesthetic activity or active social service.

All examinations other than those for Language A or Language B are usually written in English or in French, at the choice of the candidate.

It is accepted as an entrance qualification by at least 400 universities, including all in the United Kingdom. You may well question whether, assuming that it is feasible, such an examination can offer work of the same value as our A levels. Well, if you are thinking purely in terms of a predictor of university performance, I can only quote that out of the first fifty diploma holders entering UK universities, six gained Firsts at Bristol, Kent, Oxford and Sussex.

We, of course, have not been idle in our own country and I commend to you the Schools Council Examinations Bulletin No. 38. It is, perhaps, a little expensive for the individual purse but I am a firm believer in staff-room libraries, where such publications will help to stimulate the discussion we look for. This pamphlet produces two more of these mysterious letters, this time N and F, N for Normal and F for Further. Before discussing these concepts, it is, perhaps fitting to consider the principles which guided the Schools Council in arriving at their conclusion:–

> A curriculum involving the study of three subjects for A level and supplemented by a well-planned course of non-examination work can provide a sound education. A restricted range of subjects, when taught in a liberal fashion, is not necessarily unsatisfactory; but all too often A level subjects are chosen from a narrow range and are not dealt with liberally, nor does non-examination work always provide a sufficient broadening element, and then the very narrowness of the curriculum leaves unsatisfied the educational needs of many students.[2]
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> the prospective increase in size and academic range of sixth-form populations make curricular reform necessary to meet the various needs of sixth-formers;
>
> it is desirable to reduce specialization and broaden the scope of study in the sixth form;
>
> it is desirable that a pupil's choice of subjects for study in the sixth form and the university, in so far as it narrows his career opportunities, should be made as late as possible.
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> Governing Council concluded that the resolution of the problems arising from the interpretation of these principles required a radical change in the examinations structure. Part of this restructuring gave rise to the proposals for the Certificate of Extended Education (CEE), but the more radical part proposes the N– and F–level examinations which are designed to solve the twin problems of narrowness of the curriculum and premature choice of subjects resulting in exclusion of career opportunities.[3]

My outline of Schools Council thinking is, of necessity, very brief, since clearly, it is preferable that you should study these proposals independently, in the context of your own ideas and against the background of your own circumstances. I hasten to add, at this point, that my quotations from Schools Council publications do not, in themselves, indicate my agreement with their outlook, but rather my recognition that they are a major catalyst of contemporary

educational thought. You will, of course, need to bear in mind that the Schools Council was taking into account the variety of possibilities which exist in Great Britain for sixth-form work, whether in the small or large sixth-form of a school, whether in a sixth-form or tertiary college or whether in the field of further education. The common factor in all these institutions is that the students' ambitions, curriculum and interests are probably very similar. Another matter which the Schools Council had to consider was the changing nature of the sixth-form. A wealth of statistical information can be adduced, but perhaps the following items will suffice here. (The figures given refer, of course, to England and Wales).

In 1975, twenty-eight per cent of those in their first year in the sixth form, and eighteen per cent of all sixth-formers, were on courses leading entirely to examinations other than A levels such as GCE O level or the experimental Certificate of Extended Education. As shown by Department of Education and Science (DES) statistics, the majority of these students leave after one year in the sixth.

The DES sample survey estimates for the destination of school-leavers with A level passes of 1973 and 1974 indicate that approximately forty per cent of the boys and twenty-seven per cent of the girls did, in fact, go to universities. If students going on to degree courses at polytechnics are included, the proportions are approximately forty-six per cent of the boys and thirty-one per cent of the girls.

In 1974, of 121,000 A level candidates, 15,700 failed to pass any A levels and 22,400 passed one. For some students, passing one subject at A level is, of course, a considerable achievement. The pass rate per subject of the A level examinations, in subjects with a large entry, was established in the region of seventy per cent of the entry, by the Secondary School Examinations Council in 1963. The GCE examining boards use the figure as a general rather than as an absolute guide. A failure rate is built into the system, but one of the issues raised is whether the students who fail have benefited from the courses they have followed.

The A level examination system, linked with the entry requirements to degree courses, is considered by many teachers to stimulate good teaching which results in the achievement of high standards. Does it, however, result in a curriculum which is appropriate for all those who study for the examinations? The two working parties felt not.[4]

The burden of what I have been saying so far (and I hope it has not been overburdensome), is that a substantial body of educational opinion is heavily in favour of a widening of curriculum in the sixth form. If this is accepted, you have a right to ask: "Do we concede anything and, if so, what?" Well, let me read you the recommendations:

> Syllabuses should be designed to be suitable for students who have already attained the standard of O level GCE grades A–C or the equivalent at CSE. The working parties made a strong recommendation that the number of F levels studied should not be more than two. It was suggested that N level courses would have about one-half of the total study time for an A level, and F level three-quarters of the total study time for an A level. This is not to say that a subject at N level is in fact based on half an A level syllabus; N level is a new concept based on the varying needs of the students who will study for its examinations. F level is intended to provide opportunities for students to pursue subjects further and to allow some specialization.[5]

I am sure we will agree that such thinking has commendable aims, but it must always be doubtful whether these aims can be achieved unless the actual syllabus becomes capable of admitting the width and flexibility which will enable our young people to show their ability to meet the general requirements of A level work, while not being constrained to follow a syllabus which has only one end in view. For we must admit, whether we like it or not, that our A level syllabus, in modern languages at least, is dominated by a tradition which many of us are loath to give up, a tradition in which the linguistic and literary elements are supreme. These happen to be elements which I, like many others, hold in the highest regard, but I often think back to the days when I was teaching and later examining as an Inspector. I think naturally with pride of those of my pupils who went on to distinguish themselves in modern languages, but I think also of those others whose ability in modern languages was unquestioned and whose interest was easy to kindle. Many of them, however, went on later to do Science, Medicine, Agriculture or Engineering. Some went into the world of commerce, perhaps into Insurance. We, as teachers of modern languages, had to bid them farewell in Form VI, but was that necessary or even wise? How often in "The Times" or one of the other national papers do we see positions open to people with precisely such a technical training, but who must have at least a respectable knowledge of a language other than their own? We have often told our pupils, at the moment of early choice, of the importance of German to a scientist and of French as a lingua franca in scholarship and in business. Some of us may even have breathed a word of the delights of visiting these countries purely for pleasure. If we confine ourselves to the purely academic aspects of our work you may be interested in a personal experience of my own. When I was teaching I tried an experiment in the field of German poetry and I invited some of those doing the then Senior Certificate to try the translation into English of various types of poems in linguistic and metrical forms which, in their opinion, would best convey the mood and message of the poet. No holds were barred and you will, I am sure, be delighted to know that one of the most successful efforts came from a splendid chap who had no obvious potential as a German scholar and who later turned out to be one of the most brillant forwards on the Irish Rugby Team.

Equally, I can assure you, that no-one was more surprised and gratified than himself at his hidden abilities and when we occasionally meet he reminds me of his achievement with the greatest of pleasure. He, however, like so many more, had to give up his modern language studies in order to pursue other academic paths. Now, my question is, have we really done anything about helping young people in this position to develop and use to the full their knowledge and interest in modern languages? You may reply hotly that you have done precisely that, but I suggest that more often than not, this has been in fostering a minority interest, rather than in encouraging the development of a systematic study leading to a recognised qualification. Can we cater for the modern language requirements of the full range of our modern sixth-forms within our existing syllabus, or even in the N and F context? To be honest, I have no clear answer. It may be that we can consider including in the existing papers a number of optional sections to cater for the full range of our students, but I remember that when a proposal along somewhat similar lines was being put some years ago to a meeting, one of our headmasters, now retired, asked the Chairman rather pointedly: "And do we, Sir, also have a colour supplement?"

Mr. Chairman, I have tried to keep my promise in providing you with questions and I have explained my reasons for not offering answers. I have not yet referred to the Schools Council Working Paper 28. "New patterns in sixth-form modern language studies", which, though published as far back as 1970, I still recommend as an extremely interesting booklet and another valuable addition to your Staff Room library. Already in 1970 it pointed to the need for clear thinking in regard to modern languages as minority studies. I quote from the introduction where Dr. Riddy, former Staff Inspector for Modern Languages in DES, argued that there were three kinds of pupil to consider:–

> There were those who had taken O level in a language and wished to continue to study it as one of their main preoccupations up to 18+, possibly, but not necessarily, with a view to university studies in the language. This latter proviso proved to be important. What ought to be the content of a 'Main' language course terminating at 18+?
>
> There were those who had taken O level and wished to continue to study the language but not at the level of their main interests which might be in the sciences or mathematics, or in history or English literature. What ought such pupils to be offered?
>
> There were growing numbers of pupils who, whether or not they were continuing an O level language beyond 16+, were interested in starting a second or third language in the sixth form. What ought to be the content of their course and (a thorny point) how should their two-year study of the new language be assessed compared with the studies of pupils in paragraph 2 above?[6]

There is, of course, much more meat in this excellent document, to which those of you to whom I recommended it in years past, will surely testify. My final question and it is again one which I leave with you for discussion, is: "Have we gone any distance along the road to meeting the needs outlined by Dr. Riddy?" I hope, Sir, that all my questions will at least provoke discussion, even controversy and, ultimately perhaps, answers. In any case, I urge you not to treat the problem as theoretical or distant, since it is already with us.

NOTES

[1] Quoted in "The Organisation of Educational Technology in Northern Ireland", C. Latchem, Council for Educational Technology, London, 1977.

[2] Schools Council Working Paper 47, Preparation for Degree Courses, Evans/Methuen, 1973, p.22.

[3] Schools Council Examinations Bulletin 38 "Examinations at 18+: resource implications of an N and F curriculum and examination structure", Evans/Methuen Educational, 1978, p.4.

It is relevant to point out that, since this paper was delivered, Schools Council have produced Working Paper 60 "Examinations at 18+: the N and F Studies", Evans/Methuen Educational.

[4] Ibid., pp.5–6.

[5] Ibid., p.14.

[6] Schools Council Working Paper 28, New Patterns in Sixth Form Modern Language Studies, Evans/Methuen Educational, 1970, Introduction, p.xv.

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